

From passe to popular, a tale of America's old 20-cent piece

By Roger Boye

MORE QUESTIONS from Tribune readers are answered this week.

Q — We found several old coins while sorting through a box in our basement, including what appears to be a 20-cent piece dated 1875. Is it some kind of fake coin or forgery? — D.T., Chicago.

A — No. The federal government produced 20-cent pieces for four years in the mid-1870s at the insistence of congressmen from Western states. Cents and nickels did not circulate in California and elsewhere, and local businessmen thought they needed a 20-cent piece to help them in making change.

Unfortunately, the coin got little use because it was almost the same size as a quarter, and the designs were similar, too. Congress ordered production stopped in May, 1878.

Today, 20-cent pieces are popular collector items; coin dealers sell "good-condition specimens" of the 1875 for from \$35 to \$45.

Q — I have a Bicentennial half-dollar with the special Independence Hall design on the tails side. However, several letters are either

missing or blurred in the words "Independence Hall." Is my coin special? — O.S., Elgin.

A — Not really. The government had mechanical problems producing Bicentennial half-dollars due to the thickness of the design. The missing small letters you described are a common minting error, and such coins have little value to collectors.

Q — I've noticed that dollar bills have tiny letters and numbers in the upper left and lower right corners, in addition to the much larger serial numbers. For example, the numbers on my bill read "A2" and "A1539." What do they mean? — R.N., Arlington Heights.

A — Currency is printed on large sheets of paper, 32 notes to a sheet. The "A2" refers to the position your bill occupied on that large sheet of paper ("A2" would be the fifth note down in the first of four columns). The "1539" is a printing plate number.

You'll also find a small printing plate number on the back side of your bill.

Q — Are silver certificate \$1 bills major collector keepsakes? We've got 22 of them, plus a few \$5 silver certificates. — J.E., Villa Park.



Heads and tails of a 20-cent piece.

A — Some \$1 silver certificates are quite valuable, such as the series 1928C, 1928D, and 1928E, each worth \$50 or more, depending on condition. However, many of the other bills are only minor collector items.

If you want me to evaluate your bills, send me a list of the series years (1935G, 1957, 1957A, or whatever) and an estimate of their conditions (the more wear, the less collector value).

Q — We have a \$2 bill with three postage stamps attached, and the stamps were postmarked on April 13, 1976. What's the signifi-

cance of that date, and do the bills have any collector value? — R.E., Moline.

A — April 13, 1976, was the day that \$2 bills of series 1976 were first put into circulation. Author Andrew J. Vero estimates that a postmarked \$2 bill like yours would retail for from \$3 to \$5. He adds that bills postmarked in small or historical towns, or in the original 13 states, might be somewhat more valuable.

By the way, many collectors consider postmarked currency little more than a gimmick, so you might have some trouble finding a buyer for your item.